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UNCLAS ROME 002628

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SUBJECT: ITALYS LOCAL ELECTION SNOOZE

REF: FLORENCE 35

1. CONSULATES NAPLES, MILAN, AND FLORENCE CONTRIBUTED TO THIS CABLE.

2. SUMMARY: ITALYS LOCAL ELECTIONS WERE OVERSHADOWED BY UNCLASSIFIED

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ATTENTION TO THE NATO-RUSSIA SUMMIT IN ROME. ELECTIONS WENT SMOOTHLY, WITH INCUMBENTS OR INCUMBENT GOVERNING COALITIONS LARGELY RETURNED TO OFFICE. THERE ARE NO NATIONAL-LEVEL GENERALIZATIONS TO BE MADE FROM THE AGGREGATE OF HUNDREDS OF ELECTIONS DOMINATED BY LOCAL ISSUES. END SUMMARY.

3. ITALIANS VOTED MAY 26-27 IN LOCAL ELECTIONS TO CHOOSE TEN PROVINCIAL PRESIDENTS AND COUNCILS, 794 MAYORS, AND 749 CITY COUNCILS. (NOTE: ITALY IS DIVIDED INTO TWENTY REGIONS, AKIN TO U.S. STATES, WHICH ARE FURTHER DIVIDED INTO 100 PROVINCES, SIMILAR TO COUNTIES.) VOTER TURNOUT, AT 75.8%, WAS SLIGHTLY LOWER THAN THE 76.4% TURNOUT AT PREVIOUS LOCAL ELECTIONS. VOTING WAS EXPANDED IN FEBRUARY TO OCCUR OVER TWO DAYS, IN A MOVE THE GOVERNMENT INTENDED TO STREAMLINE VOTING PROCEDURES AND INCREASE VOTER PARTICIPATION. (LAST MAY'S NATIONAL ELECTIONS WERE MARRED BY PROTESTS IN MANY CITIES AS POLLING STATIONS BECAME OVERCROWDED AND WERE HELD OPEN HOURS BEYOND THE OFFICIAL CLOSING TIME. ADDITIONALLY, ABSTENTION HAS GROWN IN ITALY, IN PART DUE TO APATHY, BUT ALSO BECAUSE MANY ITALIANS GO AWAY FOR THE WEEK-END AND ONLY RETURN HOME LATE SUNDAY NIGHT.)

4. THE ELECTIONS ATTRACTED LITTLE NATIONAL OR PARTY ATTENTION, WITH NONE OF ITALYS MAJOR CITIES OR MORE SIGNIFICANT PROVINCES INVOLVED. LOCAL ISSUES PREVAILED, WITH LITTLE RESORT TO NATIONAL THEMES SUCH AS CONFLICT OF INTEREST OR JUDICIAL REFORM, AND CANDIDATES PERSONALITIES OFTEN HELD GREATER SWAY THAN THE ISSUES. WHILE IN SOME UNCLASSIFIED

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CASES LOCAL RACES WERE HOTLY CONTESTED, THESE DID NOT SPARK NATIONAL-LEVEL INTEREST. PERHAPS AS EXPECTED, THEREFORE, THE ELECTIONS BROUGHT LITTLE CHANGE: IN MOST CITIES AND REGIONS, INCUMBENTS OR COALITIONS REFLECTING EXISTING GOVERNING COALITIONS WERE RETURNED TO OFFICE. A FEW DISTRICTS WILL HOLD RUN-OFF ELECTIONS ON JUNE 9, WHERE NO CANDIDATE GARNERED MORE THAN 50 PERCENT OF THE VOTE. REGGIO CALABRIA, ON THE TOE OF ITALYS BOOT, SAW THE ONLY TURNOVER IN THE FIRST ROUND. BOTH THE INCUMBENT CENTER-LEFT PROVINCIAL PRESIDENT AND MAYOR WERE DEFEATED BY THEIR CENTER-RIGHT OPPONENTS.

5. COMMENT: ELECTION RESULTS WERE LARGELY PREDICTABLE ON THE BASIS OF PAST VOTING. EVEN THE REGGIO CALABRIA UPSET IS NOT OVERLY SIGNIFICANT; THE CALABRIA REGION VOTED CENTER-RIGHT IN LAST YEARS GENERAL ELECTION, AND IT WAS NOT SURPRISING THAT ONE OF ITS PROVINCES WOULD FOLLOW SUIT. AS ELABORATED REFTTEL, THERE WERE REGIONAL NUANCES. IN NORTHERN ITALY, ALSO, FORZA ITALIA'S PERFORMANCE WAS NOT AS STRONG AS SOME OBSERVERS EXPECTED FOR REASONS ATTRIBUTED VARIOUSLY TO SILVIO BERLUSCONI'S DECISION NOT TO CAMPAIGN PERSONALLY, THE "WEAKNESS" OF THE CANDIDATES, OR THE FRUSTRATION ON THE PART OF ECONOMIC SECTORS WHICH SUPPORTED THE CENTER-RIGHT IN LAST YEAR'S ELECTIONS. NONETHELESS, EVEN FEW PARTY REPRESENTATIVES HAVE TRIED TO IMPUTE SIGNIFICANCE TO THE INDIVIDUAL GAINS AND LOSSES; THE WHOLE EVENT WAS OVERSHADOWED BY THE NATO-RUSSIA SUMMIT. SOME OBSERVERS HAVE CREDITED THE CENTER-RIGHT WITH HAVING HAD MORE TO LOSE FROM THE ELECTION AND THUS WITH A MORE UNCLASSIFIED

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FAVORABLE OUTCOME. OTHERS SUGGESTED THAT THE LEFT REHABILITATED ITS IMAGE DAMAGED IN THE NATIONAL ELECTIONS. EITHER INTERPRETATION IS A STRETCH. TO PARAPHRASE MARK TWAIN, ANYONE ATTEMPTING TO FIND A MORAL IN THIS STORY WILL BE HUNG.
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